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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL KIRF RU GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: PATRIARCH DISCUSSES CHURCH DELEGATION TO MOSCOW

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: The Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), Ilia II discussed relations between Russia and Georgia, including relations between the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and GOC over dinner with the Ambassador on July ¶7. Former Georgian Ambassador to Moscow Zurab Abashidze and Bishop Gerasime (Head of GOC's Foreign Relations) briefed the Ambassador on their recent trip to Moscow, including meetings with ROC Patriarch Kirill and Russian DFM Karasin. All were generally pleased with the results of the trip but harbored no illusions as to the long road ahead to normalize relations and restore Georgia's territorial integrity. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: The church-led delegation to Moscow, which was undoubtedly approved by the GoG, appears to have made some progress in opening a semi-official back channel. The trip highlights the critical role the GOC plays in Georgian politics and foreign relations. Ilia II was in good spirits though his health appears to be worsening. Symptoms of Parkinson's disease were apparent and clearly concerned his entourage. The Patriarch is scheduled to fly to Germany for the third time in the past two years for "recovery" in the near future. End Comment.

Kirill Cordial, Constructive - Karasin Less So

¶3. (C) Abashidze and Gerasime said their discussions with Patriarch Kirill were productive. Gerasime and Abashidze explained to Kirill that no Georgian leader could ever tolerate the dismemberment of Georgia. Kirill acknowledged this fact and agreed that the GOC had sole ecumenical jurisdiction over both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Kirill also agreed upon the need to protect GOC property and sites in both the occupied territories. Kirill stressed the need for cooperation and stated that ROC-GOC relations should not be held hostage to political events. Kirill agreed that a meeting between Patriarchs, possibly to commemorate/celebrate the opening of the Zemo Larsi-Kazbegi checkpoint on the Georgian/Russian border, was a good idea. Kirill suggested the meeting could take place in Vladikavkaz, Kazbegi or both.

As a further sign of good intentions in trying to mend ties between Orthodox communities, the ROC will receive a group of Georgian pilgrims in Nizhni Novgorod who will arrive by direct charter from Tbilisi.

¶4. (C) According to Abashidze and Gerasime, the meeting with DFM Karasin was less productive. Karasin bristled at the suggestion from Abashidze and Gerasime that Swiss representatives should be present to provide a neutral third party observer during meetings between Russian and Georgian officials. This was discussed specifically in the context of negotiation necessary to reopen the Larsi checkpoint. Karasin said that any discussion must be in bilateral or in existing multilateral formats, despite lack of diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia. Karasin said that the Geneva talks were productive but decried what he described as the harsh, personal tone of many of the meetings. Karasin

stated that the format and talks should continue. Karasin suggested the possibility of re-establishing formal diplomatic relations, a proposal rejected by both Abashidze and Gerasime as impossible as long as Russia insisted on having three embassies in Georgia.

#### Patriarch Opines

15. (C) The Patriarch appeared pleased with the results of Othe delegation's visit and noted that the process of reconciliation would be long. The Patriarch praised U.S. efforts to engage Russia but noted that "it is impossible to change Putin". The Patriarch stated that Russian foreign policy was short-sighted and focused only on the near term. He said he thought Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would only create problems in the North Caucasus and that Russia's desire to control the "near-abroad" worsened its own internal problems. The Patriarch said that Russian policy only hurt Russian interests though acknowledged that the Caucasus were a painful and sensitive issue for Russians. Despite the difficulties, the Patriarch expressed some hope that President Medvedev would pursue a different course than Putin. The Patriarch recalled that before meeting Medvedev after the funeral of former Patriarch Alexei II, he was given a hard line text of talking points that Medvedev was supposed to follow during their meeting. Instead, Medvedev departed from the text and was warm, understanding and engaging. The Patriarch said that he had the impression that hard-liners, led by Putin, were encircling Medvedev to limit his actions and effectiveness. The Patriarch also described how he told Medvedev in no uncertain terms that Saakashvili's removal or resignation would solve absolutely zero problems between

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Georgia and Russia.  
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